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THE MENACE OF PEDANTRY IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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What should be the nature of our school and college discipline in the mother-tongue—or let us, who have a polyglot immigrant population to deal with, say rather in the vulgar tongue? That is the question which has been vexing educators in general and English teachers in particular for these past twenty-five years or more. It still troubles us; and, according to the view which I shall present, it troubles us in part because our initial efforts to solve it were vitiated by the assumption that the discipline of the young in the vernacular should follow the lines of the traditional discipline in the classic languages. This false first step has involved us in a pedantry that has been a blight upon our well-meant efforts—the cause of all our woe, with loss of reason and many other virtues. It is upon some of the consequences of this academic pedantry that I propose to speak.

It may be profitable to note, by way of seeing our subject in proper perspective, that the history of these twenty-five or more years of struggle to do justice to the vernacular epitomizes the history of that longer struggle of the vernacular against the forces of classicism and antiquarian culture which was an incident of the Renaissance; it is a history which virtually begins with Dante's great essay in vernacular poetry; takes us through the Petrarcan reaction against Dante's example, which heralded the triumphant classicism of the later Renaissance; follows an uncertain and flagging course in such Latinists as More, Bacon, Jonson, Milton, Addison; and, as we track it, brings us into touch with many abortive efforts to provide for training in the vernacular—notably those of Brinsley, Mulcaster, and Comenius. These innovators were overborne. John Locke, a century later than any of them, could write:

There can scarce be a greater defect in a gentleman than not to express himself well either in writing or speaking. But yet a great many live upon their estates who cannot so much as tell a story as they should, much less speak clearly or persuasively in any business. . . . They have been taught Rhetorick, but yet never taught how to express themselves handsomely with their tongues or pens in the language they are always to use

—a passage which reminds us of the futile relation between our first high-school rhetorics of a few years ago and our later, more sensible and successful efforts to teach the young how to “express themselves handsomely.” We cannot add, in Locke’s words, “with their tongues or pens”; for, alas! our labors have been confined to pens only; and we have allowed the tongues to wag as they would. Well, this state of affairs lamented by Locke continued. The universities themselves still send out into the world those whom they have “yet never taught good manners in speech and good taste in literature.” Yes, there sits the enemy still enforcing pedantic requirements, and giving pedantic instruction. It is a remnant of this hoary academic tradition that we may recognize in the college-entrance examination method of handling English after the manner of the treatment of Latin and Greek.

We sobered and chastened teachers may perhaps be solaced and encouraged in our own attempts to get English upon a rational basis by realizing how recently and by what sudden turn of fortune’s wheel we have been called upon to teach English. The subject is a late addition to the school curriculum. By way of bringing this home in connection with my main point, permit me to use my own case by way of illustration. I began my education under the old régime. In the English grammar school which I attended—a school of the conventional type, the type of Shakespeare’s school at Stratford, or Sir Joshua Reynold’s school at Tavistock, in my native county of Devon—no English was taught. The study of Latin and Greek was supposed to afford the necessary linguistic discipline. The mother-tongue took care of itself. Why not? Let Chaucer and Shakespeare and illiterates like Bunyan and Burns and Keats answer. They did well enough without drill in English grammar and theme-writing, and without the required study of heavily annotated English texts. For them, as for the

middle and upper classes of my own time and place, the language that was spoken was, in the main, that which was written. Men wrote pretty much as they spoke. And the voluntary and enjoyable reading of standard English authors was the great self-chosen school of the gentleman, the scholar, and the author. What were books for but to delight and attract? We schoolboys were not perverted on that point; books were not associated with school drudgery. Every home had its five-foot shelf or its small library in which it was natural to browse, when browsing time arrived; and an interest in books and culture was a normal element in good breeding and gentle manners. In short, the literary interests of the young were met and fostered in the home. That is as it should be. School reading is second best—an unfortunate necessity.

But with the development of industry, science, and democracy all this was changed. New linguistic demands arose. I can refer to only one aspect of this change. The "many-headed populace" came to power, and needed a new training. As for the masses, "We must educate our masters," said a famous politician when the new franchise made the working-man a voter in England; and forthwith new educational agencies sprang into life—the university-extension movement, people's palaces, libraries, college settlements, polytechnics; and (what chiefly concerns us here) with the new widened curriculum there came the Oxford and Cambridge local examinations in English. I barely escaped those preposterous papers set by the universities for which one had to cram the Clarendon Press editions of Shakespeare and other writers as one crammed Caesar and Virgil. How well I recall those little brown volumes, with all their learned philological annotations by infatuated Dryasdusts, who dealt with the masterpieces of English literature much as Valpy and Anthon had dealt with the Greek and Latin texts—only more so.

Here were the fatal beginnings of that academic pedantry which, confronting a new task in education, proceeded to follow mechanically, and with the inbred conservatism of the scholar, the classical traditions of the Renaissance. I cite the example of England, which I know at firsthand; but here in America we followed England's lead in this respect, and our action was dictated by the

same considerations. There was a disastrous failure to discriminate between the pedagogical status of a classical language no longer spoken and seldom written, and the living, familiar mother-tongue; between the works of writers who, in a new and difficult language, introduced the reader to a distant and alien world, and the works written in and about one's own country by one's kinsmen, written to delight and to make their appeal to the heart and mind of the average well-bred person.

Let us review some other products of this perverting pedantry. The grammars of English were little better than translations of Latin grammars. Their makers were haunted by the classic bias of Ben Jonson, who wrote his English grammar in order, as he tells us, "to free the English language from the opinion of rudeness and barbarism wherewith it is mistaken to be diseased"; and so he conformed it to the accidence of the classic languages, or, in other words, strained many a point to force the material of English speech into the molds of classical philology. A similarly mistaken point of view lingered on in Lindley Murray, for whom a grammar of the mother-tongue is to serve the same purpose, for those who speak that tongue, as the grammar of a foreign tongue serves them, namely, to teach them how to speak and write correctly. Ben Jonson's grammar was, indeed, written for foreigners; that is in its favor.

Again, who can forget those wonderful texts which vouchsafed the information that words are formed of syllables, and syllables of letters; that there are twenty-six such letters in English, as follows, and so on; that all grammar is divided into four parts—orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody. And how difficult it has proved to break away from the old point of view, let a specific example indicate. Here is a much-used textbook of English grammar (edition of 1901) which requires the student (of thirteen or fourteen years) to begin his study of English just as if it were a foreign language. Exercise 1 on page 1, dealing with nouns, reads: "(a) In the following sentences pick out the names of persons: Jack is playing with Tom and Alfred"—and so on; all the examples being equally illuminating and equally interesting. The study of verbs a few pages farther on begins with the same sort of require-

ment: "Fill the blanks with parts of the verb *have*: Each hand . . . five fingers. George . . . a present yesterday." It will be observed that these inanities, these insults to the intelligence of the normal child of twelve, bear a family resemblance to the My-sister-has-a-new-hat type of sentence in the elementary French grammar; and they conclusively illustrate the fact that in our English grammars we have been foolishly applying to our own tongue a method that has validity—and a doubtful validity—only in the teaching of a foreign tongue, where it at least serves the purpose of aiding the acquisition of a vocabulary along with the mastery of grammatical forms. In other words, the teachers of English failed (as they still do sometimes) to discriminate the work of teaching English from that of teaching Latin or French.

As for that part of grammar called prosody, the same tendency showed itself. Ben Jonson (not quite so great a sinner as Gabriel Harvey before him, who did his best to wreck Spenser) was for conforming English prosody as far as possible to the prosody of Greek and Latin, "to the end," as he says with laudable patriotism, "our tongue may be made equal to those of the renowned countries in Italy and Greece." This attitude has been partly responsible for the general failure to appreciate the metrical genius of English poetry. It is only quite recently that we have come to recognize that English prosody has a character as distinctive as that of its accidence; that it must repose on a musical appreciation of the natural accent, rhythm, and word-values of our language.

Furthermore, our practical rhetorics, still in use, usher our stammering (and often foreign-born) boys and girls into the field of composition with forbidding classification and terminology; by discoursing to them learnedly in the opening pages on diction, double negative, euphemism, and the objective genitive; by exercising them in the fine shades of meaning between "labor, work, toil, task, activity," etc., "respect, regard, deference," etc.; and by giving them a "course in errors," in which they are taught to guard against their depraved tendency to frame such sentences as that "the physician reported symptoms of incipient rubeola."

So much for the testimony of textbooks. I now pass on to consider some of the practical consequences of this pedantry which

confuses the task of the teacher of English with that of the teacher of the classic languages. I would select first of all the failure to recognize that education in the vernacular must be fundamentally a culture of the ear and the tongue. The little child acquires language in that way; the race has transmitted and developed it in that way. Under the old régime, to which I was subjected as a boy, people wrote (as I have said), at least those who could write, pretty much as they spoke. That is the natural and economical way, from which we have departed. Because people tend to write as they speak, the most economical way to get them to write well is to get them first of all to speak well. We do not act on this principle. We ignore the barbarism of the spoken word, and devote our energies to getting our young people to write well. The influence of classical learning and methods—which (at least after the seventeenth century) disregarded the spoken word and aimed at writing only—is obvious. So we have a dual language: the debased language of the street and of vulgar speech, and the (theoretically) standardized language of the schoolroom and of written discourse. The colleges lay no stress upon speech, and pay no practical heed to it. They care not how barbarous a student's oral expression may be; all they ask is correct written language. It is a ridiculous situation. The colleges merely reflect the populace's barbarian attitude of indifference, and tacitly confirm it. They are doing nothing in the interest of a capital form of human culture and good manners. If they—and, let me add, the high schools (and they need not wait upon the colleges in this matter)—insisted upon correct and refined speaking, they would not only be promoting a form of culture and good manners in which we are as a nation conspicuously backward; but they would at the same time be working in the most effective and direct way for excellence in written expression. As it is, they represent a defective type of culture which affects most unfavorably the fortunes of English work in school and college.

There are, let me here interpose, two modern developments which may force the attention of educators to our ways of speech: the need of clear dictation to the stenographer, and the need of clear and even pleasant speech over the telephone. There is a

crumb of comfort here, which I would fain share with those who feel as I do in this matter.

We may now follow further the effects of this scholastic insistence upon written values, eye values, book values, and the neglect of oral and auditory values, upon the study and appreciation of literature. There is but little reading aloud of literature in our high schools; and little appreciation of the real sensuous charm of literature, that is to say, of the very essence of literature. The reading of most high-school students is abominable. Speech has no sensuous beauty for them. The fact indicates that we have a narrow conception of what literature is. In the printed page we have merely a scheme of notation which has the same relation to literary values that musical notation has to musical values. A poem, a play, a story is not so much print: it is so much sound, music, the "heard melody." A book is a mere device for putting poetry and prose into cold storage. We habitually dwell today in this frigid atmosphere. Yes, and this preservative method is a quite modern device. Before the invention of printing the literature of the world dwelt in the memory. Literature meant song and story on the lips, and out of the heart—breathing and living through the agitated personality in face and gesture, the heard voice of man in its most perfect utterance. Homer, Demosthenes, Aeschylus, and Sophocles *sang*. Rhapsodist, troubadour, Minnesinger and Meistersinger, minstrel, gleeman, and balladist asked the listening ear. So did Shakespeare and other dramatists. They had to write and print to provide the parts for their actors. But what they were trying to produce was a composite stage result to be caught by the eye and ear. The prose of our greatest work of verbal art, the King James Bible, is prose that is to be read aloud; its lovely cadences are obviously addressed to the ear of the great congregation. I might enforce this thesis by an appeal to the sonorous prose of Berners, Malory, Bacon, and Milton; the conversational prose of Addison and Steele; or the best work of Irving and Hawthorne, which to be fully appreciated must be heard.

It is mere academic pedantry, then, to put almost exclusive emphasis on the printed or written word—cold, silent print—to

the neglect of the spoken word. That we *hear* so little good literature is partly the reason why we speak so ill: the ear is not trained by listening to correct and beautiful speech. And, to press our logic still farther, it is also undoubtedly one of the reasons why we write so ill. The ear is no longer a court of appeal. "Does it sound right?" is a dangerous test to apply. We have lost the auditory feeling for sentence unity and coherence. Our punctuation suffers likewise: we have lost the feeling for the varying pause. And I might add that not a little of our bad spelling is due to the same fault. Can we wonder that the pupils of a teacher who speaks of *Febyuary* or *privelige*, should misspell those words?

We have been perverted by the scholar's conception of literature as something to be pored over in book form, silently and solitarily; to be learnedly explicated and discussed—anything but read aloud. Instead we ought to deal with it as something born of delight and intended to evoke delight; something that in most of its forms (the novel is an exception) is addressed to us in a large, human way, through the ear, with the expectation that we shall seize its more general values, its total effects. Think of the plays of Shakespeare, written to give a vivid hour to those rude apprentices that thronged the pit of the Globe, but now submitted to our high-school and college clinics! How those "honeyed corners at the lips" of our great dramatist would widen to smiles or pucker to sneers could he but know of our cold-blooded post-mortems on his plays! We murder to dissect. Let us not flinch at the ultimate question: whether, looking at the purpose with which these pages were written, it is not perversion to use them as we do, and an unlawful and debasing thing to require that they shall be prepared for college and examined upon. Would it be any more absurd to require the student of art to pass an examination on Botticelli's "Spring" or Michelangelo's "Last Judgment"?

The only purpose for which a work of art exists is to produce delighted appreciation, or solemnized admiration. To deepen these feelings is positively our only excuse for teaching it at all. To be sure, a great thing like one of Shakespeare's masterpieces will stand a good deal of abuse. It may and does survive a great deal of our mauling and overhauling; but that fact does not excuse

our literary impiety. Our duty to Shakespeare is to present his plays and to become acquainted with them as he intended. Should we be led on to examine them more curiously or to meditate upon them in quietude, well and good; but our first duty is to treat them legitimately.

There is another aspect of the pedantry of misuse; and that is the careless way we have of requiring our boys and girls to concern themselves with literature that was written for adults, and can only be appreciated by forestalling adult experience and knowledge. It is perfectly certain that no literature was written to puzzle people, or with the expectation that it would need the laborious use of a dictionary and encyclopedia for its elucidation. Our heavy annotations are necessary because we are in a hurry, and are asking young people to anticipate the experience and knowledge that come with riper years. I know it is difficult to draw the line here; but I plead for a general point of view. We can put a safe ban upon such works as *Hamlet* and *Lear*, *Paradise Lost* and *Lycidas*, most of Carlyle and Emerson, the *Sonnets from the Portugese* and *One Word More*, as being beyond adolescent reach. But how about *The Tempest* and *My Last Duchess*, *Adam Bede*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Sir Roger*, and Burke? It is a difficult matter to decide, and I will not affect to have a settled opinion; but in general we are surely erring by being over-ambitious in our selections. Let us be more anxious to keep the young, young. Let us be disciples of Plato in this matter.

Bearing all these considerations in mind, the task of the English teacher, as I see it, is to escape from all the remaining trammels of academic pedantry and to make of English the vital, formative, ethical force which it ought to be. We must realize that in the lives of the great masses of our people the old unwritten literature of song and story has ceased to be a power. The old folk-culture, which was an edifying and beautifying factor in their lives, has faded; and we are trying to replace it by a scholastic culture which is the feeblest kind of substitute. For the old social and sociable culture of the group or throng—all the balladry and story, legend and saga, folkcrime and folk-lore, festal song and drama—we are offering the pale, individualistic culture of the book, or more

commonly the newspaper and the magazine, the rag-time ditty and vaudevillainous skit. And these things are tainted with a vulgarity which is very different from the naïve coarseness of folk art.

As for the children, all those who deal with little children know how barren their lives are becoming of all the lovely folk-lore of the nursery and the playground—rime and proverb, song and story, singing game and pantomime—which made the rich subsoil of popular culture in the past. This must be called back into vigorous being; and the life of the boy and girl, the adolescent, and the young man and woman must be enriched and uplifted by something akin to those vital literary interests which the pallid scholastic culture of the book has driven out. Let us recognize in our high-school work that songs are to be sung, stories told, and dramas acted; and that our main business is to send our pupils out into life with a delight in these things; stored with songs they really love to sing, with ballads to recite, stories to tell, dramatic scenes to enact, as well as with a ready power to make a speech, turn a verse, write a felicitous letter or dedication, a valentine, or a Christmas card. Literature and composition must be related to life; their social values and social uses must be revealed.

I have been speaking—permit me to say—not of things fancied or hoped for, but of things known and seen; a social life which was colored and beautified by literature of the folk; a life which overflowed at times—and not infrequently—with a social song and madrigal, catch and round, festal game and mummery, rime and ritual. And when I turn from these memories to this impoverished age, to the unillumined, vulgarized lives our boys and girls lead today, I feel that here is the supreme humanizing mission of the teacher of English, to which we have hardly yet dedicated ourselves: to infect life with the literary impulse in its simpler forms, that is, fittingly to evoke the voices of joy and sorrow, of admiration, hope, and love, in felicitous forms, to dignify and glorify life by literature in its proper association with those arts from which it is scarcely separable—song and recital, dance and drama.

But how will such hopes square with the realities and requirements which we are called upon to meet? I feel that we have two ideals which are far as the poles apart. We can manage, let us

suppose, to inspire a pupil with a love of letters, and his work for us has a happy touch of literary distinction. But he is weak in spelling and punctuation. No gracious power of utterance will help him get past the college Cerberus. Has not Cerberus told us that no matter what the trembling youth says in his examination paper, the manner—how he says it—alone counts; and that no matter how inane a paper may be in substance—poor little brains, what can their thoughts be worth anyhow?—a good sentence habit and a conscientious regard for the comma and the semicolon will save the day?

Now I am willing to spend a more than reasonable amount of time over punctuation. I am willing even to squander time in the wicked, wasteful attempt to get boys and girls to spell our misspelled and misshapen language; but my main task is to accomplish the bigger results. I have no doubt that they are bigger, that they are supreme. I care little how a boy spells and punctuates as compared with how he feels about life and about the ideals he has had impressed upon him in his reading: whether he responds to noble and beautiful things, whether he writes with his heart and his imagination in his task. The smaller things will come later; just as a more punctilious regard for spruceness in his dress will follow the negligent habit of unkempt boyhood.

This is, I admit, a matter of relative values and relative emphasis. But I will presume to say that when I turn from the voice of the college drill-master to listen to the voice of the humanist and reformer, I can have not a moment's doubt as to where the emphasis should be placed. I will take large chances on the probability of the smaller points of the law—spelling, punctuation, etc.—coming as by-products, and I am seldom mistaken in this expectation. And so I heed the voice of those who charge our education with gross insufficiency on the ethical and aesthetic sides. The cry is growing louder and more insistent. Education has failed to stay our epidemics of crime and our plagues of corruption in political, mercantile, and social life. The statistics of crime are a disheartening study for those who had indulged high hopes of education. Let me cite the President-Emeritus of Harvard:

It is indisputable that we have experienced a profound disappointment in the results thus far obtained from a widely diffused popular education. . . . Our forefathers expected miracles of prompt enlightenment, and we are seriously disappointed that popular education has not defended us against barbarian vices like drunkenness and gambling, against increase of crime and insanity, and against innumerable delusions, impostures, and follies.

(He mentions abuse and neglect of the suffrage, spoils in politics, divorce, quackery, etc.)

Well may the teacher of English ask himself why the power of literature, above all other subjects, has not told more favorably against these evils. Why, ah why? Partly because of the pedantry of our methods. Because we have created certain artificial school-room values, instead of allowing literature to exercise its natural and normal power—a power of appeal to the emotions and the imagination. If literature fails of this appeal, it fails of its real purpose. And it does so fail to a large extent. And here is, I believe, the explanation of the ethical shortcomings of our education. It does not reach the springs of character—the heart, the emotions. We are suspicious of emotion in education; and it is the only thing that can save us. Literature, as a form of art, must as its master-aim evoke and discipline the great emotions. As a form of art, it must present a clarified and transfigured vision of life; as a form of art, it must give us ideals of humanity and of human society.

The study of English ought to have great practical value, great disciplinary value, great cultural value; but dominating these is its ethical and spiritual value. Let our special interest in it be what it may; let us love its beauty and its technical interest and craftsmanship as we may (as we *must* if we are to teach it); yet our supreme and constant purpose as educators must be that of ministering to the spiritual need of the young: of bringing its mighty influence, its passion and power, its loveliness and its strength, to the refining and strengthening in the young of those nobler emotions and aspirations which are at once the roots of character and its most perfect fruitage.